Social distinction of urban and rural spheres of sociology

Do the urban and rural spheres remain socially distinct in any ways? Discuss with relevant ideas from urban and rural sociology.

Sharma (1997 p. 74) states that rural and urban communities form the ' end points in the continuum of development of human habitats'. However, it has also been suggested that the social, cultural and technological developments in the United Kingdom (UK) have resulted in a country wide urban society, with limited sociological distinctions between the two geographical locations, through a process of urbanisation. The remit of this assignment is to discuss this further, and will refer to various theoretical contributions to support or contradict this argument. Furthermore, specific reference will be made to the concept of communities and the essay will also explore social relations from both the urban and rural perspective.

If sociology is the study of society and its social problems, rural sociology focuses predominantly upon the existence of these within rural environments, often focusing on the countryside (Karalay 2005 p. 3). Peggs (2012 p. 89) proposes that in Britain we often perceive the countryside as being a ' rural idyll', a view which is premised upon the lower crime rates, perceived continued existence of community and kinship ties and a lower population density. However, Pugh and Cheers (2010 p. viii) suggest that such perceptions often result in clear generalisations and a failure to acknowledge the diversity amongst villages, suggesting that the definition of rurality itself is often flawed due to its presumption that each area holds homogenous characteristics. This stereotypical view of rural society being harmonious has also resulted in a failure to recognise the impact of industrialisation upon the sociology of agriculture, and the isolation often

experienced by adults in remote rural areas (Scott 2014 p. 656). The former refers to the impact that technological advancements have had upon the practice of agriculture, or the Agricultural Revolution. Whilst this has significantly increased the abilities of farmers to support a larger number of people and created a surplus of the availability of food, specifically in Western areas, it has also impacted upon climate change and employment rates in rural areas (Volti 2011 p. 6).

Whereas, urban sociology is mostly associated with the structure of a city or town as well as the social interaction between the people that live there (Peggs 2012 p. 90) and it has been suggested that cities are the ' physical embodiment of political and economic relationships; thus, an exponential focus has been placed upon urban societies by sociologists and the government (Flanagan 2010 p. 3). Browne (2005 p. 389) defines urbanization as the ' process of the movement' of people from rural areas across to urban areas with cities becoming the major centres of population. Whilst it is often associated with being exemplary of the modern world post the Industrial Revolution, Wagner (2008 p. 6) notes that is has also caused a number of ' new' problems; including pollution and the negative impact that it has had upon the environment, health issues particularly within lower socio-economic groups, and country wide inequality. Although urban communities are fundamentally developed from rural habitats, there is a number of ' glaring differences in every aspect of life' (Sharma 1997 p. 74). For example, the distinctive characteristics of an urban society is noted as being the ' substitution of secondary for primary contacts'; the weakening of kinship; decline in the role of the family; lack of neighbourhood and

community; and an ' undermining of the traditional basis of social solidarity' (Lin and Mele 2012 p. 39). For example, Flanagan (2010 p. 175) argues that one of the main reasons for migration to rural areas has always been, and remains to be, economic incentive and Sharma (1997 p. 76) proposes that urban societies have become more meritocratic, offering its citizens the chance to reach their full potential, suggesting that rural areas are premised upon a traditional value system which offers little room for change.

Louis Wirth (1938) perceived the defining characteristics of a city as being population size and density as well as social diversity; proposing that the combination of thus have resulted in a ' distinctive urban way of life' (Fulcher and Scott 2011 p. 475). Wirth's theory has been noted to be a seminal piece discussing urbanisation, proposing that he perceived this to be something which would spread to all areas; fearing that it was a ' socially disruptive' process, a threat to the moral values of citizens, that would result in a lack of community and ' underlying consensus' (Slattery 2002 p. 303). Additionally, he perceived urbanism as being separate from accounts of capitalism, industrialism or modernity and failed to acknowledge how such concepts are intertwined and dependent of each other (Magnusson 2013 p. 55).

Tonnie's (1957) analysis of the impact of the industrial revolution suggested that the disruption caused by people moving to the city led to an increase in ' large-scale, impersonal, calculative and contractual relationships'; at the expense of community (Hillyard 2007 p. 7). His theory consisted of a comparison between gemeinschaftlich, communal solidarity, and gesellschaftlich including relations of calculative and contractual natures, and is often critiqued due to his depiction of historical communities to be

romantic and ideal (Scott 2007 p. 780). Similarly, Simmel (1903) proposed that there were significant differences within human interaction in city life in comparison to rural areas, suggesting that people are more likely to be emotionally reserved and individualistic, proposing that the development of such skills allows them to ' cope with the multiple demands of urban life' (Stolley 2005 p. 169). He suggested that urban life leaves citizens ' bombarded' with ' images, impressions, sensations and activities' resulted in them becoming blasé and disinterested with others, exacerbating the emotional distance between themselves and others (Giddens 2006 p. 896). This is further discussed by Furedi (2013 p. 319) that the ' veiled hatred and contempt' for the modern industrial society resulted in Tonnies work often being disputed due to its generalised nature.

This change in the socially cohesive nature of pre-industrial society was also discussed by Emilie Durkheim (1897), however, his work was not solely from a pessimistic perspective and he argued that this was just a change in the social bonds and relationships (Hillyard 2007 p. 10). He argued that urban-adults are more likely to become less tied to the ' common concern' and develop an interdependence premised upon an organic solidarity; in which, ' social ties are based on differences' (Stolley 2005 p. 169). He felt that modern society was based upon ' the ideals of modern individualism', with concerns as to whether this could provide a sufficient foundation for society, however, felt that communities could be re-established on different grounds (Challenger 1994 p. 211).

Community is a multi-dimensional term that may refer to a physical place in which people live together but also to ' groups of people whose interaction is

not based on physical proximity but shared interests' (Robinson and Green 2011 p. 13). The concept of community is often compared within the urban-rural continuum, with Mann (2003 p. 190) supporting the theoretical perspective that urbanisation has resulted in a loss of community, and the values that are associated with it. Furthermore, Fulcher and Scott (2011 p. 475) proposed that the weakening of relationships in city life is one of the key reasons why urban-adults are significantly more likely to have mental health issues, commit suicide or become victims of crime. Yet Browne (2005 p. 393) argues that the close knit community in rural areas can actually be very ' narrow minded and oppressive'; proposing that people who are different to the majority, or even do not have family ties with the area, are likely to be excluded. This is further supported by Lister (2010 p. 203) who notes that whilst any community can provide security for some, this is often done so on the basis of the exclusion of others; reiterating that it cannot be viewed as an ' organic homogenous entity'. However, Abrahamson (2013 p. 55) argues that one of the key reasons for the focus upon urban development is community planning, attempting to alleviate the issues associated with the lack of community in urban areas by attempting to adjust the structure, provision and resources to enforce these.

Lin and Mele (2012 p. 39) state that the adult urban population are significantly less likely to be unemployed due to the number of jobs available, also suggesting that city life itself ' discourages' unemployment due to the lack of support and focus upon individualism. Yet Ferrante (2013 p. 252) argues that problems with the rural areas of a country are often under exaggerated or ignored: for example, she notes that a large

percentage of children that live in poverty live in rural areas; noting the effects of economic restructuring, decline of farming and traditional industries and the lack of sufficient support in these areas. This is further discussed by Pugh and Cheers (2010 p. xvi) who note that assumptions premised upon the idealised nature of the rural lead to a ' comparative invisibility' of some of the social issues which are just as likely to occur here as in urban societies, such as poverty, domestic violence and substance misuse; proposing that often the needs of rural-adults are largely ignored by state provision. Additionally, Betti and Lemmi (2013 p. 36) argue that whilst statistical evidence may indicate that rates of poverty are significantly higher in cities and towns, they explain this by the significantly higher population density, a higher cost of living in such areas, and the exponential costs of owning or renting accommodation in the centre of a city. Furthermore, whilst poverty is often perceived as being an inner city problem, it is found widely in rural areas with farm workers being amongst the lowest paid in society with a loss of their job also potentially resulting in homelessness and eviction (Browne 2005 p. 393).

Paddison (2001 p. 12) argues that there has become a decentralisation, with the intertwining of town and country, resulting in a country wide urban society and a rural sociology becoming less relevant in modern times. This is further maintained by Fulcher and Scott (2011 p. 471) who note that the differences between the two communities have ' largely disappeared' due to both of them now being ' shaped by the dynamics of consumer capitalism'. Although Browne (2005 p. 389) argues that since the 1960's the UK has reversed some of the changes made during the industrial period, with

increasing numbers of people choosing to live in the countryside. This is particularly relevant within areas which are within commutable distance to major cities, due to high costs of living in the cities as well as the perception that rural areas are significantly better for raising children. Furthermore, Pugh and Cheers (2010 p. 6) argue that technological advancements, such as the internet, have further perpetuated the decentralisation of urban life, with communication significantly improving in even the most remote areas; allowing people to have ' easier and more reliable access to information and services'. However, Flanagan (2010 p. 176) reports that there has been a failure to develop rural areas sufficiently, causing high urbanization rates resulting in unemployment and housing shortages in large cities; questioning whether the rate of urbanization has been ' beneficial or detrimental to economic growth'.

The lack of community life in urban environments is often cited as being one of the key distinctions between rural and urban sociology, and would denounce the claim that that rurality lacks relevance in a post-modern society. However, technological advancements, including information communication technology and transport amongst others, have led to more people choosing to live in rural environments and commuting to their employment on a daily basis. This assignment has discussed both sides of the argument, with reference to a number of theoretical contributions, including Wirth, Durkheim, Tonnies, and Simmel; each of which focus on the impact upon social relations in the city. However, it has also highlighted a number of the social problems which are indiscriminately impacted upon by location. The assignment has clearly supported the perception that there has

been a decline in the relevance of rural sociology since the Industrial

Revolution, however, it has yet to lose all credibility regardless of the

developments made in a postmodern society.

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